

**A Personal Look into a Connection  
Between Creativity and Depression in Musicians**

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

By

René L. Henry

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Dr. Christian Zembower, Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christian Zembower, D.M.G.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping flourish at the bottom.

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Fall 2004

## **My Personal Hell: An Introduction**

### **(Abstract and Preface)**

It's a sunless summer day where rain clouds take over the sky.  
It's the rows and rows of dead flowers left behind.  
It's like being alone on a desert island while hurting inside.  
It's feeling sorrow, pain, loneliness, anxiety, and anger all at the same time.  
The inner most workings of a personal hell are hidden by merely human flesh.  
The disease fuming inside can only be tamed, never cured.  
This is my cancer, my hell.  
This is my depression.

My reason for writing this paper is very simple. I just want to learn more about my illness and its implications to my field of study. My goal is not to make some striking discovery or write a guidebook for those like me; I just want to learn. My first memory of feeling emotion stems way back to my early childhood. I was about five years old when I got in trouble for expressing my feelings. I can't even remember what happened. I just remember my dad saying something that hurt my feelings. However, when I expressed this feeling, I was punished. From that moment on, it seems that I did my best to control my emotions and not let others see what I felt. As a five-year-old, I probably didn't make this conscious decision, but this memory always surfaces when I research the origins of my depression. It wasn't until I was in junior-high school that my philosophy started causing problems for me. My parents were at each other's throat and there were so many things I wanted to say. Finally, not being able to keep things bottled inside anymore, I snapped.

I can't remember the exact date or time when I made that first cut on my arm, but I remember the relief I felt. It was my freshman year of high school and my self-esteem was at an all time low. Unfortunately, my self-esteem just kept spiraling downward. Throughout high school, I kept mostly to myself. I came home each day and practically locked myself in my room. When I did come out, I just fought with my parents. There were days when I found it

very difficult to even get out of bed, let alone go to school and face the world. I was a senior in high school when I first started planning ways to kill myself. At that point, things were getting really bad, so I finally told a friend. I told her about all of the cutting and other problems. She offered her support and advised me to get professional help. I ended up telling my mom and started going to counseling sessions. I never took the counseling very seriously, and neither did my parents. After going only a few times, I managed to pretend that I was 'all better' and the issues were dropped.

College was better at first. The new experiences really made me think that things would be different, and I was finally going to be happy. Still, I'll never forget the day during that first semester when my residence hall assistant (RA) came to me with concerns raised by my roommate. After that, I went to counseling and my RA kept all of my scissors (my cutting tool at the time). By the time I moved to a new dorm my junior year, things were much better. The counseling seemed to help me get my life back on track. I was a happy, lively person. I had lost weight, classes were going well, and I loved life. I have often heard people say that you should be very careful of the 'recovering' depressant. This is because when they are feeling better, they have the energy to do something destructive. I'm not sure if I finally had enough energy or if something just snapped. Either way, I finally attempted the unthinkable.

That night in the hospital changed my life forever. I have never appreciated life as much as I did after physically running through the cold, rainy streets that night. I had hurt myself both physically and emotionally and knew that I needed some major help. From that day about a year ago, I have not intentionally hurt myself. I have learned through the help of friends, family, and counseling that life is worth living for and that everyone, including myself, is special and

important. I take life one step at a time now and just try to let things happen. I now know that life is very precious and should not be taken for granted.

At certain times during my depression, I would get really creative and write numerous amounts of poetry. I think that I could have composed some wonderful music if I had only the motivation to work. My clarinet and music became an outlet for some of my inner feelings and struggle. Not only could I express my emotions through music, but I could also pride myself on being good at something. As I mentioned before, my reason for writing this paper is very simple. I just want to learn more about my illness and its implication to my field of study. My goal isn't to make some striking discovery or write a guidebook for those like me; I just want to learn. I want to see how depression has played a role in the lives of famous musicians and how other people like myself deal with this disease.

**Many Thanks**  
(Acknowledgments)

The sheer ability to write this paper would not be possible without the help of some very special people. My mom has been a great inspiration from the beginning days of my life. Even though we've had troublesome times, my mom has always been my biggest supporter. She has been there through all of the winning times and the losing times, always cheering me on. Whether I am happy or sad, I know that I can count on my mom to listen. Thank you, Mom, for always being there and for loving me for who I am.

Some great person once said that friends are quiet angels who lift us to our feet whenever our wings have trouble remembering how to fly. I believe this with all of my heart and owe my life to some of the greatest friends ever. A big thanks goes out to Kristen and her family for always giving me a home away from home and plenty of love to go with it, to Jessica for always listening when I feel that no one else will, and to Kim for chasing me through the streets and knocking some sense into me. I will forever be indebted to Cat, my best friend, for taking care of me during my college years and giving me a safe place to go when I needed it the most. And I am, of course, thankful for the continued love and support I get from my sweetheart. I cannot fight the depression battle alone, and I am so grateful to these and other caring friends who have helped me along the way.

Finally, I need to thank my advisor, Dr. Christian Zembower, for his support throughout my final college years and on this paper. Without his encouragement and support, I may have never completed this project.

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## **Down in the Dumps** (Depression Overview)

“Depression is a serious, sometimes chronic...illness that clouds the minds of sufferers, robs them of joy and peace, wreaks havoc with their appetites and sleep patterns, and leaves their bodies vulnerable to physical illness and to death” (Ainsworth ix). The story of depression has never been very clear. Most sufferers take the illness very seriously, while others not afflicted with the illness think that depression is merely a joke. Unfortunately, the story of depression is usually a sad one. A brief look into the history, statistics, causes, and symptoms will help portray the real story.

Many people often believe that depression is a recent ailment brought forth by the stresses of today’s civilization. In *Understanding Depression*, Patricia Ainsworth, M.D. explains that depression is by no means a new illness and dates back to the ancient civilizations of China, Babylon, Egypt, India, and Greece. Ainsworth even suggests that the Bible hints toward the existence of depression in the Old Testament. Her book notes that those in ancient times believed that depression was religious in nature and therefore attempted to use supernatural intervention. During the Middle Ages, it was thought that depression was God’s punishment for sinners or souls under the devil’s control. Consequently, many depressed people were severely punished. However, Ainsworth states that depression is currently thought of as a serious illness of the body and mind, and it affects people from all walks of life. (x, 48-49).

Depression is a very common illness in that more people suffer from it than all other emotional problems combined (Minirth and Meier 20). Anxiety and depression are often referred to as the common colds of mental disorders. Many other mental disorders frequently have depression as a central or associated feature. Ainsworth states that more than 17 million Americans are affected by depression each year (4), while Minirth and Meier in *Happiness is a*



*Choice* state that one in twenty Americans will be medically diagnosed (20). Turning to the adolescent spectrum, approximately one in five adolescents will get depressed before the age of twenty (Garland 4). While other sources give approximate numbers in relation to those above, many state that numerous sufferers will never seek help. From my experiences, I have witnessed much discrimination against those with a mental disorder and the negative stigma that our society has created. Because of this concern or lack of information, many people will never seek treatment. Consequently, some may face the terrible symptoms of depression for the rest of their lives.

Depression is a painful and devastating illness. Minirth and Meier suggest that “the emotional pain of depression is more severe than the physical pain of a broken leg. Unlike a broken leg, however, the pains of depression come on much more gradually” (23). The word depression itself is a very vague term. Everyone will experience some form of a depressed mood sometime in his or her life. However, when depression is discussed as an illness or disorder, it is more than just a depressed mood. Whether an individual is suffering from a minor depressed mood or a major depression episode, depression will affect how they feel, think, behave, and even how their bodies work.

Short-lived depressed moods may bring about feelings of disinterest or a loss of pleasure in some activities. These individuals may also report a prolonged sad feeling for up to a few weeks. If these symptoms last longer than a few weeks and include a significant loss of interest in many or all activities, a person may be diagnosed with a form of clinical depression. Those affected by clinical depression “generally describe their mood as sad, depressed, anxious or flat...and often report feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, pessimism, uselessness, worthlessness, helplessness, unreasonable guilt, and profound apathy” (Ainsworth 7). Other

symptoms may include weight/appetite loss or gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor retardation or agitation, loss of energy, impaired concentration, indecisiveness or difficulty thinking, suicidal tendency, and recurrent thoughts of death (Dozis and Dobson 17-9). Along with these emotional, behavioral, and cognitive issues, depression can also cause many physiological and interpersonal impairments. Physical problems may include headaches, back and stomach pain, sexual disorders, and many other afflictions (Ainsworth 10). All of these symptoms and problems are likely to interfere with an individual's family and social affairs. Therefore, many family problems and career issues often arise from this mental illness. The multitude of issues involved with and/or caused by depression can have a serious impact upon a person's life. In my opinion, if one does not seek help, these issues could become unbearable and lead to the individual inflicting harm upon themselves.

Filled with immense pain, one may even turn to suicide, one of the saddest outcomes of depression. Suicide has unfortunately become a common occurrence in our country. Ainsworth reports that there is a suicide every 17.3 minutes in the United States (11). A person may turn to suicide when they can no longer handle all of the suffering associated with their depression. They often are filled with feelings of worthlessness and helplessness and don't feel as if they can go on living in that manner. The thought of death gives these people a sense of relief. Other times, these sufferers believe that the world would be better off without them. In either case, suicide is a very sad way to end the suffering.

There are several causes and types of clinical depression. Depression can be triggered by a life-altering event such as the death of a loved one or many other misfortunes. Other times, depression can be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. This chemical imbalance can furthermore be aggravated by other mishaps. This tendency toward depression can also be

linked to heredity. In any case, depression is “not a sign of character weakness; it is a total body illness” (Ainsworth x). There are numerous types of depression and even several ways to classify and name all of them. Ainsworth suggests that the most commonly diagnosed types of depression in the United States include “adjustment disorder with depressed mood, dysthymic disorder, major depressive disorder, single episode or recurrent, major depressive episode associated with bipolar disorder, and mood disorder associated with a general medical condition” (14).

In my research, I have found that manic-depression (also referred to as bipolar disorder) is very common, if not the most common mental illness among musicians. Manic-depression is characterized by noticeable changes in mood from depressed behavior to manic behavior. While depression is described above,

The American Psychiatric Association’s diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders describes manic episodes as follows: “The essential feature is a distinct period when the predominant mood is either elevated, expansive or irritable and when there are associated symptoms of the manic syndrome. These symptoms include hyperactivity, pressure of speech, flight of ideas, inflated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, distractibility, and excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences, which are not recognized” (Hershman and Lieb 19-20).

At one moment, a person affected with this disease could be heavily depressed and contemplating death and the next moment he could be very social and full of happiness. These severe mood changes cycle throughout the disease’s existence. Depending upon the severity of the illness, these changes in mood can be extreme and can occur almost instantly or they can resemble normalcy and remain unnoticed. An individual can stay in one mood for as long as

several years or just a few short hours (Hershman and Lieb 21). We will see how this specific disease, among others, weighs both positively and negatively on musicians.

Depression at all levels can and will affect anyone. No one is immune from or can completely prevent a depressed mood or illness. “Sufferers of depression include some of the most creative and productive members of society” (Ainsworth 5). Some of the most accomplished and productive musical figures that have been affected by depression include Peter Tchaikovsky, Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Robert Schumann, and Hector Berlioz. As we look into the relationship between depression and creativity, we will take a closer look at the lives of some of these musicians.

### **What is Creativity?**

For hundreds of years, composers Beethoven and Mozart have been hailed as creative geniuses. Concert halls ring out their creative masterpieces, and music history books tell of their fascinating life stories. Why though, are these composers considered creative, and how are they related to my younger brother who is also creative? The question of how to define creativity may have seemed like an easy one. However, upon a deeper look for answers to these questions, one may realize that creativity is a very vague term. The term creativity has become an umbrella topic, covering many behaviors. In order to study a concrete relationship between depression and creativity, we must first narrow our definition of the term.

In a dictionary, creativity is often merely defined as bringing something into existence or creating something. This definition could further imply that the mere production of something should be labeled as such. In fact, our culture often labels a certain level of productivity as creativity (Rothenberg 4). However, sheer productivity is not grounds for a creative personality.

In order to accurately define or measure creativity, one must first find some observable evidence. C. R. Rogers explains in his article, “Towards a Theory of Creativity,” that one needs to observe a “product of creation” in order to identify creativity in an individual (138). This idea is applicable to the previously mentioned composers and can help answer the question of why they are considered creative geniuses. Their creative products are the hundreds of pieces of music they composed. These pieces or “creative products” play a large part in representing and defining their creativity. Having the idea to compose a certain piece of music does not necessarily make one creative. That person must be able to carry through with his or her idea and produce their creative product. “The creative process always results from direct, intense, and intentional effort on the creator’s part” (Rothenberg 9).

Our culture today often believes that creativity is a characteristic with which one is born, while others think that creative ideas are nurtured. Creativity is also not related to one being lucky. Most of the time, much thought and work allude to a new idea or discovery. Even if one is lucky enough to stumble across a new discovery or idea, it takes a determined effort to make that idea into a product.

Although important ideas do sometimes come spontaneously—and there always are rare but interesting and dramatic accounts of bolts from the blue which solve great problems or inspire great works of art—such inspirations do not become creations unless there has been a good deal of preparation for them or unless the person is able to elaborate and develop them after they appear. Painstaking work is involved in both the beforehand preparation and the elaboration after (Rothenberg 9).

Composers are not simply blessed with the talent of writing music. Even Mozart had to study and prepare musically before turning his ideas into music. Performers, in the same way, are not

merely given the ability to play music wonderfully. Each individual had to put forth a determined amount of effort through studying and practicing music.

So, from where do these creative people come? It is mentioned above that many believe that creativity is inborn. Rogers believes that motivation and the tendency for creativity exists in everyone (140). However, conditions must be right in order to foster creative thinking. Rothenberg states that strong environmental influences can instill strong motivation to create and later suggests that upbringing and environment facilitate creative talent (9-10). Environmental conditions are very important in fostering creative behavior. Without a good support system, one may never have potential as a truly creative person. While conditions are not always perfect for facilitating a certain type of creativity, it certainly helps. The aspiration and support of family members who are also involved with or interested in music also help musicians and composers become successful.

My younger brother, Charlie, is also a musician. Although he is only a high school student, he too, can be considered creative. He partakes in numerous musical activities such as playing, singing, and composing. Charlie always puts forth a “direct, intense, and intentional effort” when working with music (Rothenberg 9). His creative products are the compositions he writes and the beautiful music he creates. While his works may never be recognized quite like those of Beethoven or Mozart, his ideas have formed creative products just the same. This goes to show that you don’t have to be recognized publicly in order to be considered creative.

After all of this research and an attempt to define creativity, it must be stated that little consistency or definite agreement about the meaning of creativity actually exist. No special working patterns characterize creative people (Rothenberg 10) and creativity has a wide range of degrees (Rogers 140). The degree of creativity is often defined by the generation of people or

time of existence and is often too much like a popularity contest. With this in mind, people of this generation may obviously see Beethoven as being more creative than my brother. Likewise, people may view Beethoven as being more creative than other prolific composers simply because his works are more popular. The inconsistent definition of creativity leaves both of these statements as skepticism. However, one fact remains constant: a measurable creative product must prevail. This leads us to consider that all musicians are creative to some degree. One would not be labeled a musician unless they continually used a “direct, intense, and intentional effort” to create their creative musical products (Rothenberg 9). Using this information about creativity, we will now look at how depressive illnesses have affected creativity in musicians.

### **Is There a Connection?** (A Look at Creativity and Depression)

“I was at one time extraordinarily puzzled and piqued about the fact that so many outstanding persons also suffered from some form of psychosis” (Rothenberg 6). These are the words of Albert Rothenberg in his book *Creativity and Madness*. His statement has echoed through the minds of psychologists, doctors, and therapists for hundreds of years. Why does it seem like so many creative people also suffer from some kind of mental illness? There are many that believe in and have tried to link psychosis, primarily of the manic-depressive nature, with genius and creativity.

According to Hershman and Lieb in *Manic Depression and Creativity*, Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance philosopher, was the first to associate genius with what is now recognized as manic-depression (8). Because many people heavily associate genius with creativity, this marks one of the first connections between mental illness and creativity. However, Hershman and Lieb credit

Plato with having said “the poetry of sane men is beaten all hollow by the poetry of mad men”, and Socrates with the idea that no invention will be created until man has been inspired and is out of his senses (8). Hershman and Lieb furthermore credit other Greek philosophers with similar ideas, so it is easy to see that many people throughout history have believed in a correlation between creativity and mental illness.

During the Romantic period, people used alcohol, drugs, hunger, thirst, and even illness to silence reason. Romantics believed in a transfer from reality and that hallucinations were the most fertile condition for the artist (Hershman and Lieb 9). Many of the symptoms commonly associated today with manic-depression were catalogued and thought essential by the Romantic concept of genius and creativity. Because of their belief in the removal of reality, Romantics often referred to manic-depression and creativity as one and the same, according to Hershman and Lieb. However, further research has led those in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond to believe that creativity does not require manic-depression or its like symptoms. Despite this recent separation, depression and creativity still seem to have many connections.

Carol Ann Beeman in her book, *Just This Side of Madness*, tells of some common myths that link creativity to insanity and/or mental illness. She states that we often hear of very productive, creative people having emotional breakdowns. Stories involving an actor that drank himself into a frenzy or a singer that committed suicide aren't uncommon and are often blown out of proportion by the media. Beeman further states that these common stories often lead people to believe in a true connection between creativity and depression. The media rarely covers the emotional breakdowns of laymen in our society, so it is understandable how these beliefs can form. She later points out that several people have suffered and have not been socially recognized as being creative (72-73). While this may be true, and a clear definition for



creativity doesn't seem to exist, how are we to know that those who suffer from depression aren't creative as well? Just because an individual isn't socially recognized doesn't mean that they aren't creative. In reference to manic-depression, Hershman and Lieb state that "sensible people do not even consider undertaking the complex and difficult projects that manics conceive and execute" (15). This source is stating that those not affected by manic-depression cannot possibly be as creative as those who are affected. This being because those unaffected would never take on the complexity that an affected person would.

Hershman and Lieb have set up a scenario that lays a foundation for a positive connection between creativity and depression:

Assume that two people of equal talent and training graduate from a music conservatory with the intention of becoming composers, and that one of them is a manic-depressive.

The composer who works harder, has more ideas, is more original, and is also a perfectionist will produce better work. Depression can make one a perfectionist and mania can provide the other assets. (11)

Many psychologists agree that manic-depression can provide specific advantages to enhance creativity. The perfectionist attitude mentioned above is quite common with depression sufferers. In my case, I feel that I must make up for all of my downfalls and therefore try to make everything as perfect as possible. Most creative work, according to Hershman and Lieb, requires solitude (15). Depression can create a difficulty in communicating with people and a need for solitude, thus giving the creative person more of a likelihood of obtaining personal time. Depression sufferers can also substitute creative work for the pleasure of a more sociable lifestyle. And while many societies encourage intense competitiveness, depression can provide critical judgment skills to help one focus on a task rather than a competitive spirit (Hershman and

Lieb 16). Besides helping the physical process, the feelings and emotions from psychotic processes (like depression) can play a role in the themes and content of creation (Rothenberg 12). This may be evident in providing thematic material for a composition or motivation for a musical performance (in using performing as an outlet).

While there are a number of positive features of depression and creativity, depression can also play a very negative role in the creative individual. According to Hershman and Lieb, some twentieth century studies have shown that depression can interfere with work or decrease its quality (10-11). Depression symptoms such as insomnia, loss of energy, impaired concentration, and indecisiveness can greatly hinder creative productivity. Several creative individuals who have suffered depression have also reported that their creative energies have been blocked at times because of their personal difficulties that create friction and uncertainties. Those who suffer from depression often focus only on how others see them, and this in turn can deflect from spontaneity and freedom of expression (Fried 100).

So, what is the answer? Many have tried to prove a connection, but are depression and creativity really linked or is this relationship simply myth? While some have suggested that highly creative people pay for their exceptional ability by suffering the symptoms and consequences of mental illness, in all of my research, discussion, and interviews, no one has been able to prove a definite connection between the two. However, no one has been able to completely disprove the connection either. One can only examine the pros and cons of the connection and look back at the lives of depression sufferers and creative geniuses.

## **Musicians and Depression** (Depression in the Life of Some Famous Musicians)

I have chosen three musicians whose depression-laden lives have interested me. In an effort to avoid copying large amounts of biographical information, I have simply touched on their lives and focused mainly on their depression. By no means do these three composers cover the wide scope of musicians effected by depression and other mental disorders. It would take several pages and much research for one to fully understand the effects of depression on the following three composers and other musicians, so I highly encourage further research. These stories are meant to simply provide examples of how mental illness and creativity have intermingled in the lives of some famous musicians. At the end of this section, Table 1 (page 18) provides a list of several musicians that have suffered from some form of depression or mood disorder. More complete composer biographies can be found in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

### Robert Schumann

Born in the summer of 1810, Robert Schumann, with the help of his father, developed an early interest in poetry and literature and would later describe his musical composition techniques as a kind of poetic activity. Although his mother insisted on his studies of law, Schumann quickly became disinterested and turned his efforts solely toward music. He later married Clara Wieck, the daughter of his old piano teacher, who herself was an avid pianist. He is widely known as a very prolific composer who composed several works for piano, orchestra, choir, and chamber ensembles among others. (Daverio 760-62)

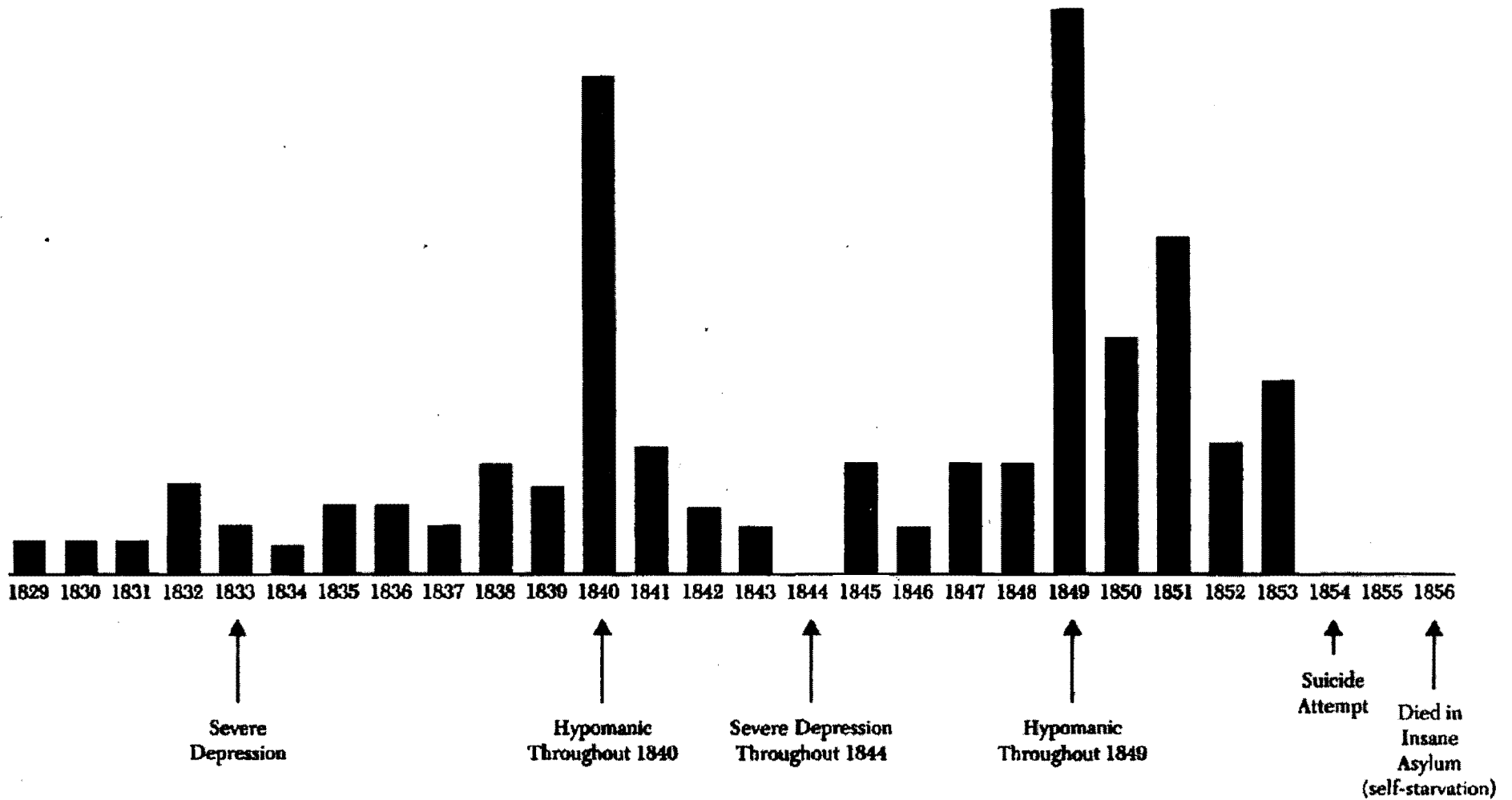
Schumann's life seems to have been destined for a mental illness. According to Kay Redfield Jamison in *Touched with Fire*, Schumann's father was "an unsettled, anxious,

ambitious, and deeply brooding man who reputedly had a nervous breakdown, from which he never fully recovered”, and his mother had several attacks of depression during her lifetime. The book also reports that other family members also showed signs of mental instability. His sister and cousin both committed suicide, one of his sons went insane and was confined to an asylum, and another was a morphine addict (202).

While sources do not agree on the year of his first recorded depressive episode, Schumann had a definite pattern of depression and manic surges by his early twenties. Some of the symptoms of his mental illness included insomnia, exhaustion, auditory disturbances, body tremors, and phobias (Daverio 790-92). Jamison briefly outlines the major depressive and manic episodes and provides a graph (Figure 1, page 14) that shows the link between these episodes and his compositional output (201-207). We can see that his depression hindered his ability to compose and that his creative energy seemed to flow when he was not depressed. Although he is not proven to have suffered from manic-depression, much of the information that Jamison provides leads one to believe this. Schumann died in 1856 in an insane asylum (Jamison 207).

Schumann’s life portrays a connection between family environment and mental illness. As discussed before in both the depression overview and creativity sections of this paper, it does show that family environment plays a very important role in all aspects of personal development. This brief overview of his life also provides an example of how depression alone hindered his creativity. The manic episodes of his assumed manic-depression are what fueled a majority of his creative works.

**Figure 1**  
*Robert Schumann's Work: Number of Compositions by Year*



Source: Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993: 146.

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven was born in Germany on December 16, 1770 and began studying the violin when he was just five years old. He began playing the piano and organ at the age of nine, and furthermore published his first composition when he was thirteen. Beethoven's mother died when he was only seventeen, and he was left to care for the family. Beethoven took several jobs as a pianist and/or organist to support his father and younger brothers before becoming a freelance musician and composer. By 1800 signs of his devastating deafness were appearing, and in 1815 he became responsible for the care of his nephew, Karl. After several years of living in total silence, Beethoven died in Vienna in 1827. (Hershman and Lieb 62)

According to Hershman and Lieb, mental issues were present on both sides of Beethoven's family. They state that his maternal grandmother was an alcoholic who suffered a mental breakdown and starved herself. His father was also an alcoholic with little self-control. Sometimes, after a night of drinking, Beethoven's father would drag his son out of bed and make him play the piano, striking him for incorrect notes. Hershman and Lieb further suggest that he beat Beethoven on a regular basis. Later they report that Karl, his nephew, was mentally unstable as well (62-63).

Through all of my biographical readings, it is apparent that Beethoven suffered several mood swings throughout his life. Some relate this to manic-depressive behavior while I can also see a correlation with seasonal depression. A majority of his 'down' times seem to occur during the autumn or winter months with his 'up' times occurring mostly in the summer. His "wild shifts of mood were no secret to his friends" as his behavior often disrupted his relationships (Hershman and Lieb 64). And indeed, the relationship between Beethoven and his nephew suffered a great deal. According to Hershman and Lieb, "Manic-depressives change the way

they treat people as their moods change, and consequently, their treatment of people varied radically. This can make life very confusing for their children, because the rules keep changing...[Beethoven] was inconsistent, bad tempered, and so starved for love that no child could satisfy his needs. One moment he spoiled Karl; the next, he hit him” (65-66). Karl later tried to commit suicide while under Beethoven’s care.

It would be easy to think that his depression was based solely on the loss of his hearing, but as his hearing got worse, his depression did not. While his hearing loss and an increased depressive state could have ended his career altogether, he turned all of his attention to composing. “Beethoven’s manic-depression may have saved him from the overwhelming despair that a normal musician would have felt on going deaf...[manic-depressives] can be happy without cause, or even in the face of misfortune” (Hershman and Lieb 67). While these authors suggest that the evidence of his illness saved him from a devastating defeat, sources disagree on whether or not he really did suffer from manic-depression. However, evidence in his music also point toward a manic-depressive disorder. His musical styles often varied dramatically and even individual pieces can accentuate radical mood change or confusion.

### Hector Berlioz

Hector Berlioz, born in December 1803, was a French composer during the Romantic period. Berlioz’s father was a doctor and highly encouraged his son to study medicine. Like Schumann, however, Berlioz became disinterested and soon turned his attention toward music. His mother highly disapproved of his choice to study music for she believed that those in art were condemned by the church and doomed to hell. Furthermore, most of Berlioz’s life was a struggle for success in music and to make ends meet financially. (MacDonald 384-386)

Triggers of his depressive episodes include the deaths of several close to him. These include his parents, his sisters, his son, a close friend, and his love interests. In addition to these, Berlioz had to write for various music journals to supplement his income. The new ideas within his music left him struggling for acceptance, and he quickly became exhausted with all the work he had to perform.

Contrary to our previous composers, Berlioz's depression seems to have helped him create his music. In reference to his epic opera based on the books of Virgil's *Aeneid*, his "diversions were no less pressing but he now found the mental and spiritual calm to produce a series of masterpieces that shine nobly through the day-to-day battles he was obliged to fight...[and] long disillusionment with the world seems to have fanned the creative flame" (MacDonald 395-96). Furthermore, Berlioz may have used some of his own experiences in composing his *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1830. This piece portrayed the drama of life and makes a frequent reference to death with the "Dies Irae" (day of wrath or death) theme. In other pieces, Berlioz would use a flattened sixth (scale degree) or end a movement with an unresolved harmony over a dominant note to give the feeling of melancholy or loneliness.

Each of these composers had similar causes and/or triggers of their depression. However, their musical lives were not affected in the same ways. While Schumann found it very hard to compose during depression episodes, Berlioz's depression can clearly be heard in his compositions. Depression, as stated before, can have both positive and negative effects on creative individuals. This has again become apparent in the lives of these composers. Depression's popularity among musicians is further displayed in Table 1 on the next page.



**Table 1**Composers with Probable Cyclothymia, Major Depression, or Manic-Depressive Illness

This is meant to be an illustrative rather than a comprehensive list...Many if not most of these writers, artists, and composers had other major problems as well, such as medical illnesses, alcoholism or drug addiction, or exceptionally difficult life circumstances. They are listed here as having suffered from a mood disorder because their mood symptoms predated their other conditions, because the nature and course of their mood and behavior symptoms were consistent with a diagnosis of an independently existing affective illness, and/or because their family histories of depression, manic-depressive illness, and suicide—coupled with their own symptoms—were sufficiently strong to warrant their inclusion (Jamison 268).

Key: @ = Asylum or psychiatric hospital

\* = Suicide

+ = Suicide attempt

Composers:

	Anton Arensky		Orlando de Lassus
+	Hector Berlioz		Gustav Mahler
@	Anton Bruckner		Modest Mussorgsky
*	Jeremiah Clarke		Sergey Rachmaninoff
	John Dowland		Giocchino Rossini
	Edward Elgar	+@	Robert Schumann
	Carlo Gesualdo		Alexander Scriabin
	Mikhail Glinka		Peter Tchaikovsky
	George Frederic Handel	*	Peter Warlock
	Gustav Holst	+@	Hugo Wolf
	Charles Ives	*	Bernd Alois Zimmerman
@	Otto Klemperer		

Nonclassical Composers and Musicians:

@	Irving Berlin	+@	Charles Parker
	Noel Coward	@	Cole Porter
	Stephen Foster	@	Bud Powell
@	Charles Mingus		

Source: Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993: 268-69.

### **Personal Interviews with Depression Sufferers**

As stated in the introduction, my goal is to learn more about my illness and its implication to my field of study, music. In order to learn more about those who share my illness, I sought out to find musicians close in age to myself that suffer from any form of depression. While I know some of these individuals personally, others simply responded to my request for information. Requesting to remain anonymous, all of the interviewees will be identified only by number in addition to their age, gender, and occupation and/or education. The questions asked include:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Occupation (major if applicable)
4. How long have you dealt with depression issues?
5. What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?
6. Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:
7. How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?
8. In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?
9. Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):

In all, I interviewed seven musicians, two males and five females, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-six. Their answers, copied directly as written by the interviewee, are as follows:

Subject 1

**Age:** 20

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation (major if applicable):** college student (Science major/Theater & Spanish minor)

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

Since I was twelve - 6th grade.

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Stress, separation from loved ones, failure at something.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

It's a cycle, once I'm locked in, it's nearly impossible to break free. Usually I feel like I'm slowly losing control of every aspect of my life and I feel like I need to do more, try harder, and be busier. Sometimes it's a numbness, and the only way to make myself feel is to either hurt myself or someone else. I often feel close to tears for no apparent reason and I sometimes feel the urge to scream at people for not understanding. It's hell, no question... but I'm also terribly afraid of getting any "real" help because I'm afraid that help will mean drugs which I'm afraid will mean losing some of who I am.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

Actually, I tend to be incredibly creative when I'm depressed. I tend to write a lot, and if I'm playing a darker character in a play it tends to be a really good performance.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

I've actually been a cutter off and on, so there have been times I've been forced to wear long sleeves or jeans when it's warm out. I've withdrawn from friends, and I also tend to either lash out at or cling to those closest to me (especially boyfriends). It affects my sleeping habits and I tend to eat noticeably less.

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**

I think a lot of creative people are also depressed to some degree, I guess it's a balance for the gifts we're given... I don't think it's fair, but what is fair really?

Subject 2

**Age:** 22

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation (major if applicable):** college student (Music Education)

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

I don't really know. When I think back to my years in high school I had some really low's and some really high high's. When I had did nothing is when it was the worst. I would say probably for 8 years.

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Large crowds such as parties (which drinking usually cured that), boredom, high stress, standardized testing, thinking about my life, when I talk to superiors I rehearse what I am going to say (people I look up to), when things aren't going the way I planned.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

Now that I am on medication it's wonderful. Before it made everything so far away and now I feel like a fog has been lifted. As much as I don't like taking medication, I now have a sense of where I am going and why I am going there. It is wonderful now, but before I would find the smallest thing to get upset about.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

I am extremely creative. I constantly plan events or fun activities. I have come to use tons of analogies and come up with things to help students learn. Musically, I express my desires and passion through playing and teaching music. I have come to love listening to jazz and now I am trying to learn more about it because it uses a different facet of emotion than I am used to. Music is my adrenaline rush as well as teaching.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

I have found healthy ways of dealing with my depression and anxiety. I used to cancel hanging out with friends all the time, but I always tried to keep busy so I wouldn't think about the things going wrong in my life. I also tried exercise and diet. Sometimes you just need a little help. I used push people away and now I let everyone in that I can. (effects of zoloft)

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**

My grandmother was depressed (musician), and my mom was depressed (musician). It definitely runs in the family and we are the musicians in the family. My uncle also hung

himself. (musician)(dad's side) My dad's side of the family are all alcoholics (a form of depression) all musically talented.

Subject 3

**Age:** 26

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation (major if applicable):** Music Teacher

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

5 Years

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Dealing with or thinking of the death of others, especially my mother. The feeling of being left or unwanted is too difficult to deal with. I also feel depressed when my job isn't going well, when my band doesn't perform at the level at which I think they are capable of doing so, or when I don't feel that I have control over situations or my class. I feel overwhelmed at times with responsibility- like everyone (particularly family) is dumping all of the responsibility on me and I am not able to handle everything.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

I feel like I just want to live another life. I want to change careers, or have a different family or anything to get away from as much responsibility as I possibly can. I want to live my life and not be responsible for things that shouldn't be my responsibility. I want to just be able to live a day to day life with out having to deal with the issues that make me feel so sad. At one time I wanted to die- thinking that would make all of the pain go away. But I know that it may take my pain away, but would cause so much more for everyone else. I have never wanted to hurt anyone, but sometimes just want them out of my life- or at least a small amount of contact. I know how hard it has been for me to deal with my mother committing suicide and I don't ever want to put anyone else through that feeling. I usually just want to hide myself from the world. I tend to want to sleep a lot and have as little contact with people as I can get away with.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

Sometimes it shuts it down completely where I don't want to play or have anything to do with performing music. Other times it lets me focus more on my playing- like an outlet to express my feelings. I just let my feelings dictate the music- sometimes it's very somber and subdued and other times loud and harsh.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

I notice it effecting [sic] my job performance more than any other aspect of my life. I ask my self why I bother to put forth any effort into trying to make things better. I have no desire to do anything more than the minimum

Subject 4

**Age:** 20

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation (major if applicable):** college student (Music Education)

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

On and off my whole life. I have been an obsessive high achiever for as long as I can remember. That has often been a source of anxiety for me.

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Like I stated before, most of the triggers have to do with myself. I put pressure on myself to reach a certain level of proficiency, and if I fall short or feel like I'm falling short, I get super stressed

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

I generally feel very angry. I'm pessimistic about life and my situation. I tend to have difficulty dealing with small issues that come up when I'm feeling that way. I get really mad really easy and don't sleep well. It generally feels like everything is pointless and hopeless. It doesn't matter how hard I try, I will never be able to recover the damage that I've created.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

I think that more than anything, it affects the way I view music. I have a difficult time enjoying playing if it's causing me pain.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

I tend to be a snappy person when I'm feeling anxious or depressed. I have a very short temper during those times. I'm not a generally understanding person either at these times.

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**

I think that lyrically, I'm more creative when I'm depressed or anxious. However, since music or things related to that are generally the source of stress or anxiety, I generally walk away from it for a while. There have been times when I have wanted to hurt my arm or something like that just so I wouldn't have to face it anymore. I needed an excuse to get away, and I felt trapped.

Subject 5

**Age:** 23

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation (major if applicable):** college student (Music Education)

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

It started about 9 years ago.

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Usually, it gets bad around the change of fall to winter. The sky is gloomy with overcast. The air is bitterly cold. People seem to get really negative, especially about the weather. Also, my stress level gets really high, and I have a hard time figuring out how to manage it.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

Sometimes I lose hope for the future and goals do not have a meaning. I can be completely okay with life ending at any moment, because it'll be easier than living. The things that make me happy don't always do the trick. I'm constantly fighting myself as far as feelings go. I want to be happy, but I'm not.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

I find that I become more creative and more apt to play my musical instrument when I get depressed. It's a way of focusing my negative energy into something I think is good. Also, creative/musical activities are a really easy way of keeping my head focused and keeping my mind from wandering to those things that make me depressed.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

It has made me a more private and independent person. I only have a few friends and they are people that I can fully trust and know they can help me during my down time. I have an extremely hard time focusing. I have a tendency to eat more and gain weight, which leads to an unhealthy lifestyle. I sleep more, so I don't get as much done or spend time around friends as much.

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**



Subject 6

**Age:** 17

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation (major if applicable):** high school student

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

I have been dealing with depression and anxiety issues for about five years. When I became an eighth grader and actually started to care about what other people thought of me. People begin to judge more on first impressions than on lasting relationships.

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

There is no real cause or trigger to my depression. There are simply areas of my life that compile on top of each other and produce certain feelings of depression. The feeling that you are a tiny speck in the whole picture that has little or no effect on the general outcome of the masses. A lot of times, when I am doing something without the accompaniment of people I know, I become very closed off from the outside. I purposely attempt to avoid contact with people in the fear that I will do something wrong.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

Like walking through the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant; something you only need to do once.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

I hate playing my instrument by myself. I hate the sound I produce and most of all I hate when people tell me that I sound good. People, especially those you are close too, always tend to be bias towards you. They want to see you happy so in turn think of it as a good thing to tell you you are good, when in actual reality you [stink]. I guess depression had caused me to not want to strive to be a better player. I figure I [stink] now, why attempt to get better?

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

Depression has affected my life quite a deal by limiting me on what I can or cannot do. It has slowed my progress in developing into a member of the American society.

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**

Not really...

Subject 7

**Age:** 19

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation (major if applicable):** college student (Music Education)

**How long have you dealt with depression issues?**

For about six years

**What are some possible causes or triggers of your depression?**

Divorce of parents, infidelity of parents, verbally abusive boyfriends of mother, living in impoverished conditions, bad relationship and long distance from father, personal struggles with sexual identity, personal struggles with religious identity, feeling of having no friends, feeling of being undesirable (lack of self-confidence) with both friends and potential partners, not ever dating, having a negative body image, having widespread emotional highs and lows, too much pressure on oneself to achieve perfection, misfortunes in relationships, emotional distance between myself and males, lack of male role models.

**Describe, in as many or as few words as you wish, what depression is like for you:**

It's like seeing everything in your life, even the things most important and dear to you, through a fog that will not dissipate.

**How have/do these issues affect you musically/creatively?**

When I'm depressed, i either invest all of my time into music. Or, I completely abandon music. There are two radically different reactions. I do tend to write a lot of prose and poetry during depressed times.

**In what other ways has your depression affected your life and how?**

Depression usually incites a withdrawal from people around me. I waste more time watching tv, watching movies, talking to people only through instant messenger. I tend to listen to very depressed music. I have a general haze that is seemingly caste over every action in my life. I have a hard time paying attention in class, getting motivation to finish homework. I tend to eat a lot more than normal, or eat nothing at all. I usually find tasks such as exercise or practicing that will take my mind away from things that may be a little more imperative. I tend to oversleep, never being able to wake up to my alarm.

**Anything else you would like to add (specifically pertaining to depression and creativity):**

Nope

The responses of these individuals are in no way an accurate description for the lives of all other depressed musicians my age. As stated before, these were simply a way for me to learn more about my illness and how others like myself deal with it.

A major symptom of depression is loneliness. Therefore, it is important for sufferers to not only relate to those with similar issues, but to also know that they are not alone. Each of these individuals have experienced depression symptoms for five or more years and clearly have things in common. I personally feel less alienated by the fact that I am not alone in my suffering and it comforts me to know that there are others just like me.

### **To Be Continued** (Conclusion)

We have summarized depression, creativity and a possible link between the two.

However, as stated before, there is no biological proof that any connection between creativity and depression exists. As with many psychological disorders, much research is still being conducted and possible links are still being identified. All one can do now is study those who have experienced depression in the past and those who currently suffer.

Depression can be a very devastating disease. It can lead to great unhappiness and its effects can leave a life scared forever. I have been dealing with depression for at least eight years, and I have had many moments of extreme unhappiness. To be quite honest, I hate being depressed, but I love depression. I hate feeling the emptiness and hopelessness, but I love studying the effects that it has on different people. It is very interesting to study the causes, symptoms, and effects that depression has on different individuals.

I know that this project is supposed to represent a capstone of my undergraduate work. However, I prefer to look at it as a link or a building block for my future. I have always been interested in psychology, but never enough to make it my primary field of study. After my personal experiences and writing this paper, I know that I cannot leave this interest unattended. This paper doesn't even begin to fully explain some of the psychological aspects of music and creativity linked to depression. I now know that I want to continue learning about this topic and further my studies in psychology. Therefore, this paper provides a successful ending to my undergraduate studies in music, but also provides a small foundation for my future studies in psychology.

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